



Ng, Elaine. "Shifting Objectives: Design from the M+ Collection." *Art Asia Pacific*, May/June 2017.

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SHIFTING OBJECTIVES: DESIGN FROM THE M+ COLLECTION

Hong Kong's M+, shorthand for "Museum Plus," will officially inaugurate its permanent building in 2019, but the institution is already living up to its name by reaching beyond the traditional parameters of an art museum. The ambitious HKD 5 billion (USD 644 million) project will be Asia's first multidisciplinary establishment dedicated to art forms as esoteric as contemporary ink painting and video art, but also fold in other disciplines. Aric Chen, M+'s lead curator for design and architecture, mounted an offsite exhibition devoted to his specialization in 2014, and returned with a selection from the 2,500 design objects in the institution's collection for a second show, "Shifting Objectives: Design from the M+ Collection," at M+ Pavilion, a temporary exhibition space in the West Kowloon Cultural District.

The presentation was split into two sections—historical and contemporary forms of design—and situated design in a modern Asian historical context by beginning with Japan, East Asia's first postwar industrialized nation. Chen highlighted a familiar and easily overlooked household item, created seven years prior to US president John F. Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women, which promoted equal employment opportunities and paid maternity leave: Toshiba's electric rice cooker, which was first released in 1954. The appliance signified convenience for many Asian women, and garnered instant mass-market appeal. Now, the rice cooker is an essential item in homes around the world—a testament not only to the Japanese touch, but also the impact of good design.

Similar transnational dialogues took place in other parts of Asia. For instance, India's Chandigarh occupies a mythical status for lovers of modernism, who might say a sojourn in the city eclipses a visit to the Taj Mahal. Chandigarh was built from the ground up, as ordered by India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, to represent the secular and rational ideals of a newly independent nation. To accomplish this, Nehru enlisted Swiss-French modernist architect Le Corbusier as Chandigarh's master planner. M+ acquired *Borne en Béton* (1952), a concrete light fixture that resembles a road barricade, designed for the new capital city of Punjab and Haryana in 1952. Carefully chosen materials, such as concrete and teak, suited Chandigarh's heat and humidity.

During the same period in China, design was implemented to promote Marxist-socialist ideologies. M+ displayed instructional booklets produced by state-run agencies, such as the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House, which defined the rules of production for all objects and media in the People's Republic. A row of Soviet-style propaganda posters depicted the idealism of this era, including one lithograph

produced in 1978—the year marking Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics"—presenting a proud female comrade showing off steel pots and water kettles. A slogan was plastered underneath in Simplified Chinese: "Provide Quality Goods, Serve the People Wholeheartedly."

Elsewhere, Chen's exhibition revealed the ties between postmodernism and transnationalism. On display were incredible works by Ettore Sottsass, founder of the Italian anti-design group Memphis. Sottsass developed a fascination for India—his first visit was in 1961, and many subsequent trips followed. An early example of the Subcontinent's imprint on Sottsass is seen in *Superbox* (c. 1968). This towering plywood container, decorated in a hypnotic striped pattern of electric and moss green, is a nod to the Shiva linga, an abstracted phallus.

The rest of the exhibition rushed into the present, providing a glimpse of limitless possibilities in design, including Japanese studio Nendo's upcycling of Issey Miyake's pleated paper remnants to construct an offbeat chair, and Korean designer Kwangho Lee's light fixture conceived by knitting a single electrical cord—an act inspired by his grandmother's pastime. A display at the end of the show was dedicated to the mind-boggling creativity of established product designers, hackers and neophytes in China's dynamic Pearl River Delta. There were inexpensive, lightweight mobile phones with oversized buttons and screens for China's growing elderly population, and Dajiang Innovations' famed *Phantom 1* (2013) civilian drone produced for the mass market. Refreshingly positioned from an Asian perspective, "Shifting Objectives" showed how far we have come in terms of design, functionality and social progress, even pointing to where we might be heading.

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